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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000952

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FROM AMBASSADOR POLT FOR A/S FRIED

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2017

TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#)

SUBJECT: YOUR JULY 10-11 VISIT TO BELGRADE

Classified By: Ambassador Michael Polt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (c) Dan - Your visit comes amidst a surprising, if brief, lull in heated Kosovo rhetoric from Serbia's leadership. The lack of a decisive statement out of Kennebunkport has left Kostunica and other Kosovo hardliners without a clear hook on which to hang additional Kosovo vitriol, and the approaching summer season will leave the government somewhat depleted as ministers and others take their traditional vacations. This lull gives you something of a vacuum to fill. It provides an opportunity to reiterate our commitment to completing the status process and our expectation for Kosovo's inevitable independence, and to reassert a message of unity in the Quint.

BELGRADE'S TACTICS

¶2. (c) Kostunica still has no strategy for finding an alternative solution for Kosovo to the Ahtisaari Plan. The ideas given by Kosovo Minister Samardzic to Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexeev, even by the admission of KOSMIN senior officials, contained nothing new. Kostunica remains content to score tactical victories - every day without resolution is seen as another day he has "beaten" the Quint. Meanwhile, he has intensified in recent weeks a targeted media campaign designed to drive a wedge between the USG and the rest of the Quint. His messages portray the U.S. as the sole author of the current impasse, and focus on the deteriorating relationship between Serbia and the U.S., while noting separately that relations with Europe are improving as SAA talks move forward. He remains confident that he has the Europeans cowed and that open-ended negotiations are the likely future for Kosovo.

¶3. (c) Kostunica's speech marking Vitovdan was a new low in nationalist rhetoric from the PM - recalling for many the nationalistic hate speech of Milosevic at a similar commemoration in 1989, Kostunica ranted about a "new battle for Kosovo" between the U.S. and Serbia. The speech drew a surprising amount of criticism even from local media, which is usually hesitant to cross the government on Kosovo policy, and was probably a miscalculation. My response to his remarks simply reiterated our longstanding friendship, dismissed the notion that we are somehow at war, and highlighted all the areas where we work together. This reaction played very well in local press and further highlighted Kostunica's irrationality on the subject.

ADRIFT AFTER KENNEBUNKPORT

¶4. (c) Following that tirade, Serbia's leadership held its breath and looked forward to a strong statement from Putin out of the Kennebunkport meeting with the President. The GoS was clearly poised to react, but ended up sending out a reaction statement that fizzled when there was no clear statement on Kosovo from either side following the meeting. While only a few days have lapsed since then, Serbia's

leadership seems for now a bit unsure of how to proceed with their media campaign. It is in this atmosphere that your visit will take place - just two days ahead of a planned visit by Kouchner. There is little advance information about how Kouchner plans to run his trip, other than to show us all how to handle the Balkans, but there are local rumors that he may come to town with a partition proposal.

YOUR MEETINGS AND MESSAGES

15. (c) Your only official meetings will be with President Tadic and PM Kostunica; a press conference will follow at the Embassy. With Tadic, it will be important to remind him that we notice the difference between his private reassurances that Serbia will engage responsibly and his almost enthusiastic public adherence to the Kostunica rejectionist line. In fairness, there is a subtle nuance of difference between his and the PM's public position - Tadic has asserted he does not want Serbia to isolate itself over Kosovo, while Kostunica seems indifferent to such a consequence. But given the systemic immunity of the Serbian body politic to nuance, the effect on moving public opinion has been negligible. Consistent opinion polling and our own analysis suggests that Serbia can get beyond status relatively unscathed, but only if the GoS is willing to lead it there. Tadic needs a regular dose of reminders of this.

16. (c) With Kostunica, there is little left to say privately. He will not move from his position, and is relatively unmindful of the consequences, apparently willing to throw in with the Russians if that is the price for disrupting a status solution. The best you can probably do is cast all subtlety aside and tell him in the starkest possible terms our commitment to an independent Kosovo -

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preferably through the UNSC, but outside that framework if necessary. It is unlikely to influence the outcome, but might move him through the grief cycle a bit, away from denial and anger and - hopefully - in the direction of acceptance.

17. (c) At your press event, I recommend you take a tack similar to mine in responding to Kostunica's Vitovdan rant - note the inevitability of Kosovo's independence as a straight declarative, then move on to areas where we remain committed to Serbia's future - development assistance, investment and job creation, and military-to-military cooperation. In addition, wherever possible you should refer to the U.S. and our European partners, to undo some of the traction Kostunica has achieved in portraying us as split from the rest of the Quint on Kosovo. In the absence of a statement from Kennebunkport, your comments will be the first firm indicator since that meeting of where we stand and where we're going. It will be good to have you back here.
POLT